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AUTHOR Kearns, John
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ABSTRACT

A controlled study investigated the impact of systematic praise techniques on 145 sixth-grade students' self-esteem. Eighty-five students comprised the experimental group, and 60 students made up the control group. The study was initiated in order to explore the link between self-esteem and academic achievement. The attempt to increase student self-esteem consisted of having the classroom teacher follow specific guidelines in providing feedback to students and focusing feedback on student accomplishment in skill areas as opposed to areas of academic achievement. The students were assessed using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills. Data were analyzed via a correlated t-test and a two-way analysis of variance to determine differences attributable to the experimental program developed. Results support the notion that gains in self-esteem are likely to be attributable to positive feedback by instructors. (TJH)

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# The Impact of Systematic Feedback on Student Self-Esteem

by

John Kearns, Ph.D.
College of Education
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario
Canada L2S 3A1

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The Impact of Systematic Feedback on Students' Self-Esteem


## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of systematic praise techniques on grade six students'self-esteem. This study was initiated in order to explore the link between self-esteem and academic achievement. An attempt to increase student self-esteem was undertaken by a) having the classroom teacher follow specific guidelines to provide feedback to students and b) by focusing the feedback on student accomplishment in skill areas as opposed to primarily high academic achievement.

The sample in this study consisted of 145 grade six subjects who were tested using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and the Canadian Test of Basic Skills. The Data were analysed using a correlated t-test and a two-way analysis of variance to determine if differences attributable to the experimental program developed.

## Statement of the Problem

While one goal of effective teaching is usually higher student achievement, there is an additional, more intangible component to effective teaching that cannot be measured by standardized achievement tests often used in our schools. That component is higher student self-esteem (Henry, 1986). Positive self-perceptions in relation to learning and school are particularly important if we see education as a life long process where people must initiate their own learning experiences.

Historically, studies have revealed a correlation between student self-esteem and school achievement. Generally, the studies have shown that pupils with positive self-esteem are more successful in school than pupils with negative self-esteem. While the exact nature of the relationship between self-esteem and school achievement has not been established, most educators would see the enhancement of the self-esteem as important to school achievement. The problem, however, is that little research has been conducted that suggests ways to enhance self-esteem

in the classroom. It was this concern that prompted the present study.

While the correlation between academic performance and self-esteem is widely documented and accepted by educators, and, since most teachers want their students to be as successful as possible in their academic work, it follows that inviting school success as a means to the enhancement of student self-esteem could be an important step to this end. Waitley (1985) wrote that positive self-esteem is the most important and basic element that makes up the critical attitude necessary for success. Unfortunately, many student do not achieve at a high enough level of academic performance to experience positive self-esteem (Morse, 1964; Bills, 1978).

Recognizing that many students, for a variety of reasons, do not achieve at a sufficiently high academic level to enhance their self-esteem, there is a need to develop alternative techniques to address this issue.

In an informal survey of Junior classes (grades 4, 5, and 6), when the author asked students to be specific about what they had accomplished in school that year, it was found

that most students could cite specific accomplishments in mathematics and physical education, but very few accomplishments in other curriculum areas (see Figure 1). Upon examining the commonalities existing in mathematics and physical education, it was found that in both cases, objective feedback was readily available to the students about how they had changed and about what they had actually done. It was much easier for students to know about their accomplishments in these two areas than in other curriculum areas.

However, much of the emphasis from parents and teachers in the school curriculum is placed on learning to read and write. As Curriculum material is commonly presented to children, and because the change in the language arts and other areas are more subtle and subjective than they are in mathematics and physical education, it is difficult for students to know what they have done. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where students spend many hours and exert much effort but fail to be aware of the differences, if any, the experience has made in them.

When teachers focus on high academic achievement, many students receive too little positive feedback about their

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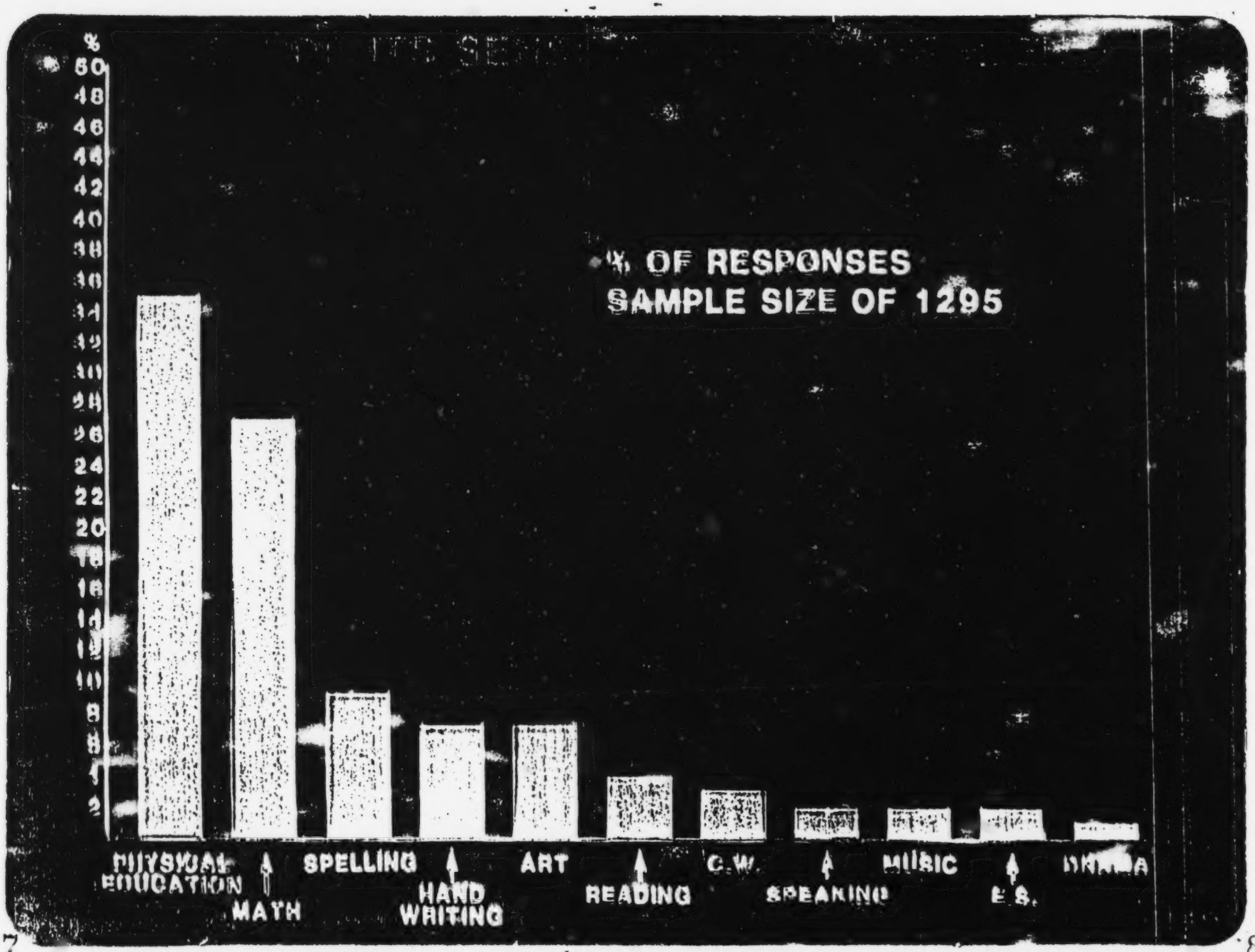


Figure 1: Students Sense of Accomplishment

work to enhance their self-esteem because they are not achieving at a high enough level to warrant any praise. There is a need for a means through which positive self-esteem can be developed in a school setting by all students, and is not limited primarily to high academic achievers.

This study grew out of this concern and examines the value of a planned and systematic feedback program to enhance self-esteem in grade six students.

## Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to determine whether or not the self-esteem of students could be enhanced. The techniques identified by Brophy (1981) to provide praise to students were employed in this study to provide feedback to students as recognition of accomplishment.

Accomplishment, as it used in this paper differs from achievement. Accomplishment refers to what a student has done. It is used in a non-evaluative manner and recognizes student efforts in working in the various skill areas of the school curriculum. Achievement refers to the academic

attainment at a sufficiently high level to enhance one's self-esteem or to maintain a high level of self-esteem in an academic environment.

A search for answers to the question, "Does student self-esteem rise when teachers make a conscious effort to recognize various areas of student accomplishment as opposed to high achievement?" comprised the major focus of the study.

## Theoretical Rational for the Study

### Stability of the Self

Syngg and Combs (1959) and Tuttle (1987) have suggested that individuals seek to maintain and to enhance their perceived self. They imply that the self is open and receptive to change that is in a positive direction but resists change if it is going to mean a lower self evaluation. Both Jersild (1952) and Tuttle (1987) wrote that the question of whether to reject or assimilate an experience may depend in part on the frequency of the experience or one similar to it, and on the degree of importance that an individual places on the experience.

Many authors (Cohen, 1958; Brownfain, 1952; Coopersmith, 1967) have written that people with low self-esteem are more likely to have unstable self-concepts, and consequently more suseptable to change and to be dominated by situations. This theory lends support to the interventionist approach used in this study. If students who have low self-esteem have unstable self-concepts, there is an implication that a more positive self can be developed.

Self-Worth Theory

Covington (1976; 1984) wrote that for children, effort is the supreme virtue. Harari and Covington (1981) contended that work-ethic values reinforced by parents and teachers are essentially the strongest determinants of worth for children. Their research indicated that effort for children takes on the same valuation that adults accord to ability. For children, there is a psychological equivilance between ability, effort and achievement. This seems to occur for two reasons.

First, kindergarten and preschool children believe that children who try hard are smarter than those who don't try

hard (Nicholls, 1976; Stikep, 1981; Harari and Covingtcn, 1981). In these studies young children perceived effort and ability as synonymous. Second, Dweck (1983) refered to what he called the "incremental" theory of intelligence. Dweck wrote that children believe that an increase in effort causes an increase in ability. He wrote that young children believed ability to be expandable through experience and instruction. Therefore, ability is seen by children as controlable in a similar manner as effort, hence "incremental".

From these studies, it appears that children attribute a greater role to effort as a source of personal worth than do adults. Nicholls (1976) stated that low ability people appear to hold value for effort to a later age than do high ability people.

The implication for attempting to enhance the self-esteem of children is that low ability people are frequently also low self-esteem people. In attempting to improve students feeling of self-worth, it would seem important for teachers to recognize both effort and accomplishment in their students. Through this action, teachers could attempt to enhance the feelings of self-worth

for those students who do not feel worthy by virtue of their seeming inability to attain high levels of academic achievement. The interventionist program that was the basis for this study emphasized the recognition of student accomplishment to attempt to enhance student self-esteem.

Praise as a Form of Reinforcing Feedback

Several researchers (Brophy, 1981; Yarrow, Waxler, and Scott, 1978; Brophy and Evertson, 1976; Good, Ebmeier and Beckerman, 1978) have conducted studies which have contradicted the commonly held belief by educators that praise is a desirable and valuable form of student reinforcement. They have found that teacher's praise failed to correlate with other dependent classroom variables in a manner that would be expected if praise were functioning as a positive reinforcer for the students to whom it was given. In each case, the effects of praise were examined as they occured routinely in classroom applications.

In several studies, using class means (Brophy and Evertson, 1976; Martin and Veldman, 1980) it has been found that praise correlates weakly but positively in the early

elementary grades with student achievement in only the low-ability students.

From Brophy's (1981) work, a list of recommendations regarding the use of praise are outlined. According to Brophy, praise should:

1) be informative or appreciative, not controlling;
2) be contingent upon objective accomplishment;
3) specify the particulars of the accomplishment;
4) be individualized;
5) attribute success to effort and ability;
6) attribute effort expenditure to intrinsic motivation; and
7) be private, most of the time.

These guidelines are a valuable contribution, not only to the work regarding praise, but to the area of student feedback in general. It was Brophy's guidelines to the administration of praise that were followed to administer feedback to students in this study.

## Description of the Experimental Program

Many writers have written that physical activity has a positive effect on the development of self-esteem (see Glencross, 1978; Harris, 1973; Kane, 1972; and Whiting, 1978). Within the programs that reported an increase in self-esteem levels, several common factors appeared to be

operative. In most cases, the successful physical activity programs included the following factors:

1) the participants perceived the program to be challenging;
2) the participants acquired some skill or increased their ability in an area that held some value for them;
3) the participants perceived the program to be dangerous or risky;
4) the program was developmentally appropriate, that is, the participants were physically, mentally and emotionally capable of responding to the program's expectations;
5) the program was presented in a sequential manner; and
6) the participants felt a sense of accomplishment based on recognizable progress toward achieveable goals.

From this list of factors, the sense of accomplishment was identified as very important to the development of the self-concept. The decision was made to focus on the factor of accomplishment in this study because it was believed that accomplishment was a broad factor which included other factors as well. It was believed that if students could see, through their accomplishments, that they were acquiring new skills in academic areas, this would be viewed as positive by them. While the students may not have valued the academic skills in every case, it was felt that they would value them because their parents in most cases believed academic skills to be important.

It was also felt that learning anything new can have elements of risk associated with it. While the risk is not dangerous in a physical sense, learning can be seen to be risky in a psychological sense when one must display what one has learned to others. To recognize accomplishment in a school setting, it is implied that learning in an academic sense has occured and therefore some risk on the part of the student has been experienced.

If one goal of educators is to help children build a positive self-image, then one way we may do this is to communicate to students our sense that they are worthwhile, capable people. Therefore, throughout this study an attempt was made to increase student self-esteem by a) having the classroom teacher follow Brophy's (1981) guidelines for providing feedback to the students and b) focusing the feedback on student accomplishment in skill areas as opposed to primarily high academic achievement. Through this approach, the focus of the student's school experience was on what one "could do" as opposed to what one "could not do".

Following the selection of the three Experimental group teachers, the teachers and the author met to a) select the

skills from the curriculum guidelines that were appropriate for the students to learn, b) familiarize the teachers with the guidelines for providing feedback to the students, c) agree on a workable approach to providing feedback to the students and d) standardize procedures for administering the tests (Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and The Canadian Test of Basic Skills) used in this study.

Each curriculum guide (Language Arts, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Art, Physical Education, and Library) was examined to identify those skills a student would use when working within the content areas. Once identified, these skills were arranged to form a series of checklists according to subject area. The purpose of selecting specific skills was to have a vehicle by which to show students exactly what they had done in a variety of areas without reference, necessarily, to how well they had performed the skill. When students had performed a skill in a commendable manner, or when they had shown growth in a skill area based on their past performance, this was considered to be a praiseworth occurrance and was brought to the student's attention by the teacher. Where feedback was given that dealt with achievement, past performance was used

as the measure of comparison so that the predominant tone of the feedback was positive and realistic for the student.

Brophy's (1981) guidelines for providing feedback were followed to show students the personal progress that each had made in the skill areas. The focus of the feedback was on the skills the student had accomplished. Students received feedback on variable schedules that reflected individual student progress, individual student need, and curriculum unit activities. The scheduling of the feedback varied from one class to another and varied between students.

Prior to beginning the program, the teachers and the author also discussed specific strategies that were in keeping with the above guidelines that could be employed. Each teacher used the following strategies within their class: a) make positive and personal contact with the home for all students;

b) provide for student self-evaluation of their own work and make plans for future growth in keeping with the student's self-evaluation;

c) provide time for students to make personal journals of their successes and progress that had been made each week;

d) find positive strengths in all students and give recognition for this, and provide opportunities for students to extend these strengths;

e) place success within the reach of every student. Define success in a variety of ways so that it allows for individual differences; and

f) write positive comments on student work in addition to grades and often instead of grades.

The sample in this study consisted of 145 grade six subjects of which 85 students comprised the Experimental group and 60 students made up the Control group. The subjects wrote the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) three times during the study, once each in the Fall, Winter, and Spring. The first test produced the pretest independent variables while the remaining two test periods served as the posttest dependent variables. The Canadian Test of Basic Skills was also administered in the Spring.

Correlated t-tests and a two-way analysis of variance were used in the analysis of the data to determine if

differences attributable to the Experimental program developed.

## Findings of the Study

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) was selected for this study because it is comprised of four subscales which measure attitudes toward self in a) social, b) school, c) family, and d) general areas of experience. For purposes of analysis, the 145 grade six students in the Experimental and Control groups were regrouped on the basis of their performance on the School subtest of the SEI. This was done to determine if students with low School self-esteem responded differently to the Experimental program than students with high School self-esteem. Students scoring fifty percent or more of the School subtest questions negatively were placed in the "low School group". Students scoring negatively on less than fifty percent of the School subtest questions were placed in the "high School group".

1. From Table 1 two points can be noted. First, in every case for both the Experimental and Control groups, those students in the "low School group" scored lower than the "high School group" on all the subtests of the SEI as well as the Total SEI (the four subtests combined) test at all three test times. This may indicate that students who regarded themselves negatively in an academic sense also regarded themselves more negatively than students in the "high School group" in every area measured by the SEI. This may be for one of two possible reasons. It may be that students who generally felt poorly about themselves carried this feeling with them into the classroom. Conversely, it may be that students who regard themselves negatively in school also see themselves negatively in other areas. There is insufficient evidence from this study to make any conclusions in this regard.

Secondly, the School scores are the lowest of all the subtests for both the Experimental and Control groups, and the "high School group" and the "low School group" with one exception. The "high School group" in both the Experimental and Control groups scored lowest on the Social scores with the School scores being second lowest. This observation may

Table 1
High and Low School Group
Means Table by Test Period for SEI Subtests

| Test | Group | Time | Low | High |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School | | | | |
| | Exp. | Fall | 3.121 | 6.383 |
| | | Winter | 4.061 | 6.468 |
| | | Spring | 5.333 | 6.532 |
| | Con. | Fall | 3.320 | 6.325 |
| | | Winter | 3.560 | 5.925 |
| | | Spr. | 4.480 | 5.775 |
| General | | | | |
| | Exp. | Fall | 15.667 | 18.383 |
| | | Winter | 16.303 | 18.489 |
| | | Spring | 17.000 | 19.383 |
| | Con. | Fall | 16.160 | 18.600 |
| | | Winter | 18.400 | 19.625 |
| | | Spring | 18.760 | 19.675 |
| Social | | | | |
| | Exp. | Fall | 5.545 | 5.681 |
| | | Winter | 5.424 | 5.596 |
| | | Spring | 5.727 | 6.021 |
| | Con. | Fall | 5.000 | 6.225 |
| | | Winter | 5.920 | 6.300 |
| | | Spring | 5.960 | 6.175 |
| Home | | | | |
| | Exp. | Fall | 5.333 | 6.383 |
| | | Winter | 5.364 | 6.362 |
| | | Spring | 5.333 | 6.340 |
| | Con. | Fall | 4.760 | 6.050 |
| | | Winter | 5.320 | 5.975 |
| | | Spring | 6.040 | 6.175 |

indicate that school is more difficult for students generally to feel good about than are the other areas measured by the subtests.

2. From Table 2 it can be seen that 41.25 percent of the Experimental group and 38.46 percent of the Control group scored in the "low School group" at the first testing of the study. This figure represents a large number of students who were feeling poorly about themselves in an academic setting. It was interesting to note that in both the Experimental and Control groups, the "low School group" showed increases in the School scores on the SEI. It may possibly be explained by the phenomenon of the significant other, in this case the teacher.

In the initial stages of the research, it was difficult to locate volunteers to adopt the role of teachers for the Experimental and Control groups. Eventually six teachers were found and agreed to be part of the study. It is conceivable that the six teachers who volunteered to be part of an eight month study were "special" as teachers and as people interested in their students. The quality that these teachers inherently possessed and the manner in which they

Table 2
Distribution of Students
In Low and High School Groups for SEI

| Group | N | Overall Low | Overall High | Overall %Low | Overall %High | Of Low Group %Male | Of Low Group %Female |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exp. | 80 | 33 | 47 | 41.25 | 58.75 | 55.32 | 44.68 |
| Con. | 65 | 25 | 40 | 38.46 | 61.54 | 52.50 | 47.50 |

Table 3
Group Means Over Time

| Group | Fall | Winter | Spring |
|---|---|---|---|
| Exp. High | 6.383 | 6.468 | 6.532 |
| Exp. Low | 3.121 | 4.061 | 4.966 |
| Cont. High | 6.325 | 5.925 | 5.775 |
| Cont. Low | 3.320 | 3.560 | 4.480 |

intuitively interacted with their class may be accountable for the rise in self-esteem scores of both the Experimental and Control "low School groups".

3. Table 3 indicates that while both the Experimental "low School group" and the Control "low School group" increased their School scores over the course of the study, the Experimental "low School group" showed twice the increase of the Control "low School group". This represents a level of probability that is significant at the 0.10 level. It is possible that this trend may be accounted for by the instructor influence plus the Experimental program of systematic feedback that was the basis for this study.

The observation that the "low School groups" increased their School self-esteem scores is in keeping with the theory of Syngg and Combs (1959) and Brophy and Evertson (1976). Syngg and Combs (1959) theorized that while individuals strive for inner self-consistency, individual with low self-esteem may strive to improve the outlook that they have of themselves. In many studies, (Brophy and Evertson, 1976; Good, Ebmeier and Beckerman, 1978; Anderson, Evertson and Brophy, 1979; Martin and Veldman, 1980) it was

found that praise techniques correlated positively only with those students who were low achievers. Many authors (Shaw, 1961; Fink, 1962; Combs, 1963; Durr and Schmatz, 1964) have written that low academic achievement correlates positively with low levels of self-esteem. The findings of this study support these earlier works. Students recording the greatest gains in self-esteem scores according to the SEI were those who initially scored low in self-esteem. This may be explained in two possible ways. First, as indicated above, the low self-esteem students are those who are most likely to improve according to the literature cited. And Secondly, due to the restriction imposed by the ceiling of the tests administered, the students in the "high School group" did not have as much room for growth as their peers in the "low School group".

Brownfain (1952) and Coopersmith (1967) maintained that individuals who viewed themselves negatively were more likely than people who saw themselves in a positive light to be situation dominated and influenced. People who had a lower self-esteem, it was argued, would feel a heightened sense of self-esteem in a favorable situation. This is in keeping with the findings of this study.

4. Gender differences were recorded between the Experimental group boys and the Control group boys School scores, and between the Experimental group girls and the Control group girls School scores. In both cases the gains recorded by the Experimental group dramatically exceeded those gains recorded by the Control group. While both groups recorded gains over the duration of the study, the Experimental group boys' increase was twelve times greater than the Control group boys', while the Experimental group girls recorded an increase that was three and a half times greater than the Control group girls. These differences may reflect the impact of the Experimental program on the Experimental group participants (see Table 4).

5. The purpose of administering the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) was to determine if any changes in self-esteem by the participants could be attributed to high levels of academic achievement. Kifer (1973) used the criteria of the upper one fifth of the class as the level that he believed necessary to positively affect self-esteem. From Table 5, it can be seen that the sixty-sixth and seventy-fifth percentiles were used as critical levels of achievement on eight academic subtests of the CTBS

Table 4
Means Table, School Scores
Split by Gender and by Group

| | Fall | Winter | Spring |
|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental | | | |
| Males | 4.804 | 5.261 | 6.065 |
| Females | 5.353 | 5.765 | 6.000 |
| Control | | | |
| Males | 5.086 | 4.943 | 5.171 |
| Females | 5.267 | 5.100 | 5.400 |

Table 5

Distribution of Low School Scores

For The Canadian Test Of Basic Skills

| Test | Group | Below 66 | Below 75 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vocabulary | Experimental | 71.0% | 93.6% |
| | Control | 81.8% | 88.0% |
| Reading | Experimental | 76.7% | 83.3% |
| | Control | 80.0% | 92.0% |
| Spell | Experimental | 96.6% | 100.0% |
| | Control | 91.7% | 100.0% |
| Capitals | Experimental | 76.7% | 90.0% |
| | Control | 95.8% | 100.0% |
| Punctuation | Experimental | 89.7% | 93.1% |
| | Control | 95.7% | 95.7% |
| Usage | Experimental | 86.7% | 93.3% |
| | Control | 78.3% | 86.9% |
| Math | | | |
| Concepts | Experimental | 75.9% | 89.7% |
| | Control | 83.3% | 100.0% |
| Problems | Experimental | 81.8% | 100.0% |
| | Control | 83.3% | 100.0% |

(Vocabulary, Reading, Spelling, Capitalization, Punctuation, Usage, Math Concepts and Math Problems). The scores of the "low School group" were examined on each subtest to determine what percentage of this group scored below each of the two critical levels just mentioned. If one accepts the level of the upper one fifth of the class as established by Kifer (1973) as valid, then it can be said that as a group, the gains made by both the Experimental group and the Control group in self-esteem are likely not attributable to high levels of academic achievement.

The scores recorded on the CTBS by both the Experimental and Control groups lend support to the notion that gains in self-esteem are more likely attributableto positive instructor influence in both groups, in addition to Experimental program factors in the case of the Experimental group.

## CONCLUSION

Invitational education is an exciting approach to teaching which is steadily gaining acceptance as an effective interpersonal technique for interpersonal interaction. This study was an attempt to intentionally

invite students by demonstrating to them through positive feedback that they were able and could feel proud of their accomplishments in an academic setting. To this end, the author is encouraged by the findings reported in this paper.

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